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1 message

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Push for Hackmatack Wildlife Refuge prompts debate on financial, ecological control of conserved lands

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[PHOTO] Volunteer Bob Boyd clears invasive species from the Pleasant Valley Conservation area. (H. Rick Bamman - hbamman@nwherald.com)

The Department of the Interior estimates that the federal government owns about 30 percent of land in the United States – nearly 650 million acres.

Add that to the amount of land owned by state governments, then local agencies such as forest preserves or the McHenry County Conservation District, and it's not unreasonable to ask: How much is too much?

"When you think about it, we are a nation – at least in theory – by the people, of the people, for the people," said James Taylor, senior fellow for environment policy at The Heartland Institute. "Yet the government owns nearly a third of land directly."

It's that line of thinking that has prompted many to ask who is the best caretaker of special land, such as the rare habitats the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering linking to form the Hackmatack Wildlife Refuge.

The service could decide by early 2012 which land will be included in the refuge, which could encompass portions of northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin.

But several years could pass before the service receives from Congress the money it needs to actually begin establishing the refuge.

"It's hard to say when we would get the funding," said Tom Larson, chief of the division of conservation planning for the midwest region of the wildlife service. "Of course you're in competition with everything else in the federal budget, ... and funding sometimes depends on congressional interests."

Randal O'Toole, a public policy analyst who has written extensively about publicly managed land, said the federal government did a better job funding capital improvements than operations when it came to entities such as conserved land or refuges.

As a result, "a lot of them are poorly managed," said O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute.

"The lands are in poor condition, and [wildlife employees] don't have the resources to improve them," he said.

Larson didn't dispute that Congress' funding could drop off over the years, and said that when or if that happened the service relied on volunteers to fill in the gaps.

"There's a strong coalition of environmental groups that have worked hard to get operations and maintenance funding for refuges," Larson said.

However, others interpret the federal mismanagement as an opportunity for the private sector to step in where the public arena has failed.

Taylor said that if the public was interested in preserving land, they first should try to use private organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, Sierra Club or National Audubon Society.

"Where the land is so special, so beautiful that people would like to set it aside ... there are people willing to fund that," Taylor said.

If a private entity cannot accomplish the level of conservation sought by the public, local public agencies similar to the conservation district in McHenry County could step in.

"The closer you are to the land issue, the more likely that the land will be put to its best, preferred use," he said.

Only after these two avenues have been exhausted should state or federal authorities be considered.

But before the feds get involved, Taylor said, they should do something President Obama actually suggested in a memo issued earlier this year: Sell off less important land that the government doesn't need.

"If we determine as a societal issue that we are going to have government ownership, I think the funds should come from trading off other lands," Taylor said.

O'Toole said another solution to a lack of federal funding would be for agencies such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife to strategize ways to generate revenue from the refuges.

"That's not something that's ever asked about public lands, but it ought to be," he said.

A central problem with refuges, O'Toole said, is most attractions are free. And for things that do carry a charge, most often the price is below market value.

"You can make money, [so] you don't have to be a burden on the taxpayers forever," he said. "Entrance fees, hunting fees, fishing fees. All kinds of fees could be charged."

Using the same techniques that pricing experts in the business world employ, the service could determine just how much people are willing to pay for nature.

It's an idea the service has entertained, Larson said, but on a limited basis.

"There are a few refuges in the region where there is an entrance fee," he said.

Out of 62 refuges in wetland districts, only two or three have entrance fees, he said. But most of this is due to the geographical nature of the refuge.

"Most of them have multiple roads coming through them," he said, so it would be hard to establish one grand entrance where visitors could pay.

Cindy Skrukrud, a clean water advocate with the Illinois chapter of the Sierra Club who also lives in the Hackmatack study area, said she thought the best solution would be for a variety of sources to be employed.

"Certainly if a refuge gets established, it's going to need money for people to maintain it," she said. "But I think the strongest conservation program includes entities operating at all levels."

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